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ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of the student affairs profession in higher education. The strengths of student affairs include diversity and involvement. Student affairs staff are trained in many different disciplines and are located throughout the campus. The diversity of student affairs professionals is seen as the thread that enables the needs of students to be met and the mission of student affairs to be realized. Student affairs professionals nurture students' involvement in learning and ultimately facilitate the total undergraduate experience. Weaknesses in student affairs are also described. Student affairs professionals must become purposeful in learning and contributing new skills to participate at more central levels of the institution. Suggestions for becoming partners in the campus milieu are provided. Because of the lack of institutional awareness, the goal of student affairs professionals to be accepted as legitimate academic leaders with upwardly mobile tracks is often unrealized. The digest concludes that student affairs has a strong future in serving students, and an even stronger one in serving its institutions. (NB)

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A President's Perspective on Student Services Delights and Debts

Betty Turner Asher

Student affairs has been praised and critiqued in the literature perhaps more than any other functional area in higher education. From the perspective of a current president and former chief student affairs officer, I shall add to both sides of that running dialogue.

The strengths of student affairs clearly include diversity, contributions to the involvement of students in the learning process, and general impact on the personal and social well-being of college and university students.

Its weaknesses lie in its struggle to be a professional discipline (Bioland, 1992) while youthful as a career field, and in its struggle to be a partner and a full player in the campus milieu.

Delights

Diversity

The student affairs organization is decentralized — staff are located throughout the campus. Student affairs staffs are trained in many different disciplines; skilled in techniques ranging from assessment, mediation, program planning, counseling, computing, problem resolution, and more; committed to flexibility and creative approaches to getting the tasks done.

These same diverse individuals share the values necessary to respond to the pressing challenges on the higher education agenda today as they responded in the past: changing demographics, gender, ethnic, and social issues, personal health issues, volunteerism and service to communities, and internationalization of campuses. Student affairs staff with diverse backgrounds, skills, and values provide visible and needed leadership to the campuses as we face these challenges together. This same diversity is perceived by some as an impediment to "professionalization". Nevertheless, it is the thread that enables the needs of students to be met and the mission of student affairs to be realized.

Involvement

Involvement in learning (Study Group, 1984) proclaimed that student affairs professionals nurture students' involvement in learning and ultimately facilitate the total undergraduate experience. That long standing, critical role of structuring ex-

periences "outside of the classroom" so that students may practice what is being learned "in the classroom" was given renewal, vitality, and confirmation. The search to appreciate cultural and spiritual aspects of their lives was also reaffirmed as educationally sound. This report reaffirmed what Astin (1985) told us much earlier — students learn best in the academy by becoming involved, and what Cross (1987) stated — students generally learn what they practice.

The role of student affairs professionals is distinctive: although we are teachers, we are not regarded as regular members of the teaching and research faculty; we administer organizations, but aren't regarded as administrators by many members of the campus community (Lyons, 1990). It is heartening to note that student affairs professionals participating in the report mentioned above were regarded as "educators" and "teachers" (Study Group, 1984).

Student affairs staff have been the valued architects of campus life, personal development, and involvement of students since the birth of the profession. Lyons (1990) also reminds readers that students' learning is affected by how they feel about themselves and their environment. Therein lies the importance of a highly trained and diverse student affairs staff to the learning process. They create the campus environment for students, interpret it to students, and celebrate it with students. They will continue to function in that role.

Debts

Partners in Campus Milieu?

Student affairs professionals must become purposeful in learning and contributing new skills to participate at more central levels of the institution. Leadership in the rapids of modern changes require skills unused in more stable times. As staff members recognize and accept the changing responsibilities facing institutions, a professional priority becomes understanding the total institution, including concerns of schools, colleges, and departments. For example, as schools and colleges struggle with new demands such as those placed upon them by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business, the American Bar Association, or more specialized bodies like the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, willing and aware student affairs staffs can assume a true role of academic support. It is not uncommon

to have professional staff unaware of the standards required by CACREP or other related groups which reflect their own professional discipline. Effective student affairs staff can and should be major players in the training of counselors, advisors, and other student affairs professionals in training, preparing for accreditation reviews, and maintaining compliance with academically related standards. As student affairs professionals desire to have an impact upon the lives of individual students, they must desire to have equally far ranging and significant impacts upon the institution at large. This notion requires knowledge about and input into decisions at the highest level of institutional administration.

Student affairs professionals are trained primarily as generalists. They frequently tend, however, to function too much as specialists and miss opportunities to make greater contributions to the institutions they serve.

Institutions are consistently under pressure to demonstrate accountability to their many publics — legislators, parents, alumni, and regulatory bodies. Much institutional data rests in the hands of student affairs professionals — registrar, admissions, housing, financial aid, and job placement. If they focus upon serving their institutions, student affairs staffs will initiate measures to acquire outcome data to assist institutions with public responses. These same data have critical relevance to faculty as they deal with academic policy and curriculum decisions. Although institutional goals may vary considerably and may change occasionally, I have yet to find institutional goals in conflict with goals of students.

Glass Ceiling

Because of the lack of institutional awareness, the goal of student affairs professionals to be accepted as legitimate academic leaders with upwardly mobile tracks is often unrealized. When student affairs professionals come to understand that a glass ceiling exists, they are disillusioned and sometimes leave the field, taking considerable valuable knowledge and expertise with them. Most institutional participants fail to realize that residence hall directors are managing real estate valued at millions of dollars and financial aid directors are managing tens of millions of dollars. I share Bloland's view (1979) that chief student affairs officers become administrators who happen to specialize in student affairs. I would add to Bloland's view — they are always educators first. Regrettably, there is not yet full recognition that those same skills, talents, and experiences ready one for roles of executive vice presidents or presidents in universities, especially large doctoral institutions. I happen to be one of those who "made it" (defined by holding the title of President), but it is not uncommon to hear peers whom I admire say that chief student affairs officers can't make it to the presidency. I believe they are best prepared for the roles of President or Executive Vice President. It is repeatedly stated that individuals enter the profession for humanitarian and social reasons, but appropriately take on personal, financial, and social obligations requiring professional advancement and salary increases to survive. Only higher education loses when the glass ceiling is reached and profes-

sionals are forced to leave the academy. The attrition of student affairs staff will slow as they become more proactive in creating and maintaining an effective environment for the students and in making the university more aware of their contributions.

We need to acknowledge, however, that not everyone wants to progress upward into higher administrative levels or even to become "one of them." There are many who continue to find stimulation in teaching and other leadership roles and make enormous contributions to the field, and to their institutions by providing stability, continuity, a much needed historic perspective for the institution and its culture, and mentorship to the profession as a whole.

Conclusion

Student affairs has a strong future in serving students, and an even stronger one in serving its institutions. Its power resides in the values shared within the profession, its diversity, and the varied leadership skills that can be brought to bear upon the challenges facing the future. To be maximally effective, student affairs staff must be creative in defining their roles and functions, clear in defining them, and proactive in implementing them.

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